

Robert Musil gives confidence to the no-self minority like me

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Mette Leonard Høeg

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Living without my self

Our culture valorises the big, coherent self: reading Robert Musil helps me embrace the beauty of my no-self existence

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I don't feel like I have a self. Most people I encounter speak about their experience as if they have an internal centre of awareness – something inside doing the perceiving and feeling, a centre to their subjective experience. And most people seem to connect this intuitive sense of a singular self to who they were yesterday, last month, last year – to a continuously unfolding life-story stretching back to their earliest childhood memories. I've always struggled to relate to

people with such seemingly full and wholesome selves and coherent life narratives. When I look inward, I find no locus of awareness. There doesn't seem to be anyone or anything at the centre in me, nothing identifiable that is generating or receiving experience; only thoughts and feelings that don't seem anchored to anything, changing patterns of energy that are simply happening. I don't remember much from my past either. When I recall it, it comes to my mind mostly as facts – CV-like points that are useful for functioning socially and professionally but with which I feel little emotional connection.

Nonetheless, I've always been drawn to people with voluminous self-conceptions and coherent life-stories. Indeed, I've spent a good portion of my professional life as a literary scholar and critic with a focus specifically on life-writing. Karl Ove Knausgård's *My Struggle* (2009-11) was the primary example I used for my master's thesis on autofiction. Over the 3,000-plus pages of this six-volume work, the Norwegian author tracks his identity all the way from childhood to his adult self in the present moment of writing, connecting events from his entire life into one continuous narrative. It is perhaps the most extensive reconstruction of an individual's personal history in literature, the most solid manifestation of narrative identity – a veritable opus of the continuous self.

The final volumes were written after the publication of the first and so could include meta-literary descriptions of his experience of the reception of the first book in the series. I remember a rumour at a time when Knausgård still hadn't finished *My Struggle* that he was deliberately aiming to quantitatively outdo [Marcel Proust](#), the old master of meticulously retracing the past. Proust's quintessential, and only slightly shorter, autobiographical novel, *In Search of Lost Time* (1913-27), was one of the main examples of my doctoral dissertation. Its narrator (a thinly disguised version of the author himself) claims the elusiveness of the past, the impossibility of holding on to it and preserving it in the present, while in effect doing exactly that: manifesting the past as a reality in the present through recollection and literary recreation of the semi-autobiographical narrator's life-story in incredibly sensuous and emotionally evocative detail.

The idea of human existence as the continuous journey of a singular self is not just typical of European life-writing but a convention of Western literature and culture as such. In philosophy, it is what we see conceptualised in essentialist and narrative accounts of selfhood, which maintain that some form of persisting personal essence and sense of narrative coherence is not only natural for humans, but necessary for acting morally and living a meaningful life.

Living without a sense of self or narrative identity as I do in a culture of strong selves and big narratives is in many ways exciting. My self-experience of insubstantiality and emptiness seems to come with a certain existential flexibility and freedom, and specifically, a susceptibility to absorption in other people's stories. Having little or no sense of an inner essence, and only a vague feeling of boundaries between myself and what is around me, I find it easy to immerse myself in narrative fiction as well as the real lives of others. This might explain why the line between fiction and reality has been diffuse in my life. Most of my romantic relationships have been with professional storytellers – writers, journalists, filmmakers – working creatively with self-representation. I've become entangled in other peoples' narrative experiments, and appeared as a character in published life-stories several times. This has given me rich and

deep experiences of immersion in other worlds and of merging with other minds. But I've also always felt divergent, un-mirrored by the narratives of human existence I've been submerged in.

Literature does not just passively reflect our intuitions and ideas. It shapes our expectations and conceptions, influences our perception and experience of ourselves and the world. It shapes and manifests our shared experience as a culture. It has confused me that my own experience didn't match what I read about in books or encountered in the culture around me. I've even been clinically assessed for borderline personality disorder – symptoms of which include inner emptiness, an unstable sense of identity, and dissociation. I was deemed psychologically healthy (although one of the psychiatrists kindly advised me to take care when speaking to other health professionals in the future as my unusual description of my self-experience might, from a superficial medical view, seem pathological) which was a relief. But it didn't remove my feeling of existential isolation. The only place I felt mirrored and at home as a young student of Western narrative was in the literature of Robert Musil.

I first read *The Man Without Qualities* (1930-43) while pursuing my doctoral studies on the blending of fiction and nonfiction in life-writing. In the pages of this immense and infamously unfinished philosophical novel, I encountered for the first time a description of what existence feels like that aligned with my own experience.

Tellingly, the title of the novel has often been taken to suggest that the protagonist of the novel, Ulrich, is suffering an identity crisis, the default assumption being that living without fixed qualities or a stable and continuous self must lead to existential distress, in line with our culture's narrative and essentialist view of personhood. The title, in fact, was meant to designate the opposite: Musil outlines an existential *ideal* that coheres with my minority non-essentialist and non-narrative intuition. Indeed, its title might as well have been *the man without a self*.

Philosophically, the novel conveys the millennia-old Buddhist teaching of *anattā*, the doctrine of no-self: the view that the feeling of there being a centre to our consciousness is an illusion, there is no observer, no one who experiences or thinks, only transient experiences – perceptions, sensations and mental formations that continuously arise and pass away. Musil combines this philosophical view with a scientific-materialist account of personhood influenced by the Austrian mathematician and philosopher Ernst Mach on whom he wrote his doctoral thesis. Inspired by [David Hume](#) and his 'bundle-theory' of self, Mach proposed a non-essential, functionalist theory that presents the self not as a singular, enduring substance but as a collection of sensations and a functional, ever-evolving structure. Through a story about the love between a brother and a sister, Musil's novel illustrates the inherent beauty and the potential for existential emancipation and moral enhancement in living without an essential self.

They are struck by their resemblance to one another as they turn up dressed in the same Pierrot-like pyjamas

The first volume introduces the situation from which the siblings are trying to break free; their story unfolds in the second. Volume 1 – comprising parts 1 and 2: ‘A Sort of Introduction’ and ‘Pseudoreality Prevails’, in the translation by Sophie Wilkins and Burton Pike – is a scathing yet curiously compassionate critique of Viennese high society in its last moments of cultural-capitalist comfort as it stands unwittingly self-absorbed on the cusp of the Great War’s outbreak. This is observed with bemusement, curiosity and soft irony by Ulrich, a 32-year-old mathematician with no clear sense of purpose in life. The focus is on the planning of the so-called parallel campaign by a group of intellectuals and officials – an event to celebrate the 70th jubilee of the Austro-Hungarian emperor in 1918 with the aim of outshining the German celebrations of the German emperor the same year.

In the second volume – Part 3, ‘Into the Millennium (The Criminals)’ – the literary tone changes markedly, becoming more lyrical and tender, as Ulrich leaves the city and returns to his childhood home in a small village for the funeral of his recently deceased father. Here, the story’s second protagonist appears as Ulrich is reunited with his sister, Agathe, whom he hasn’t seen since their childhood. When they meet again, in the evening in one of the rooms of the house, they are both struck by their resemblance to one another as they each turn up dressed in almost the exact same Pierrot-like pyjamas. From here, the existential project of the novel emerges.

Isolated in their childhood home, removed from the contemporary political and cultural discourses of Vienna, the siblings enter a kind of timeless experimental space as they dedicate themselves to readings and discussions of Eastern and Western contemplative texts on epiphany and transcendence and to intuitive meditative investigation. Their project unfolds as a non-religious spiritual and existential explorative practice with general relevance. Their path, we learn, has ‘much in common with the business of those possessed by God’, but is walked by Ulrich and Agathe ‘without piety, without believing in God or the soul, nor even in the beyond or in reincarnation’, simply as ‘people of this world’.

As the siblings grow closer, their connection soon extends beyond the platonic. This incestuous element may seem superficially provocative, but it serves a philosophical purpose. It is framed as ‘a journey to the edge of the possible, which led past – and perhaps not always past – the dangers of the impossible and unnatural’ and ‘a “borderline case” ... of limited and special validity, reminiscent of the freedom with which mathematics sometimes resorts to the absurd in order to arrive at the truth.’

The biological link points towards the deeper and spiritual nature of their likeness. As Agathe and Ulrich move towards congruence of identity, physicality, gender, mind and language, they come to represent siblinghood as union in a broader metaphorical and existential sense. Their merging illustrates one of the central ideas in the novel of the hermaphroditism of the primordial imagination. Their minds combine into a form of collective creative imagination that transcends conventional binaries. Their relationship represents an ideal of transhumanism, post-individualism and post-essentialism – an interhuman connection and existential mode with shared identity beyond gender, biological sex and cultural norms, beyond fixed qualities and the singular self.

The vision emerging from these experiments is one of a more meaningful and ethical mode of being in the world. A life less dictated by fixations with fleeting current affairs, passing philosophical and cultural trends and interpersonal tensions and competition, and of increased experiential intensity and connection with immediate surroundings and with other people. It is conceptualised as an existential position between 'mathematics and mysticism' and encapsulated in Ulrich's poetic-political idea of establishing 'a World Secretariat for Precision and Soul'.

Central to the cultivation of this existential mode is an altered state of awareness at times referred to as 'the Other Condition'. This appears as a fundamental form of consciousness and an overlooked dimension of reality in which the ordinary sense of self and perception falls away to reveal something truer: 'One sometimes forgets to see and to hear, and is struck completely dumb. And yet it's precisely in minutes like these that one feels one has come to oneself for a moment.'

Reaching the Other Condition entails letting go of the idea of the self as a demarcated entity

In the Other Condition, the sense of demarcated individuality disappears and, with it, the distinction between the observer and the observed as a state of oneness, as both fullness and emptiness is reached and ordinary oppositions are dissolved. It is an experience as much of 'intensification as of loss', like 'looking out over a wide shimmering sheet of water – so bright it seems like darkness to the eye, and on the far bank things don't seem to be standing on solid ground but float in the air with a delicately exaggerated distinctness that's almost painful and hallucinatory'. A feeling of being connected to and inseparable from everything while at the same time everything appears more distinctive than ever: 'You stand here, and the world stands there, overly subjective and overly objective, but both almost painfully clear, and what separates and unites these normally fused elements is a blazing darkness, an overflowing and extinction, a swinging in and out. You swim like a fish in water or a bird in air, but there's no riverbank and no branch, only this floating!'

As the title indicates, reaching the Other Condition entails letting go of the idea of the self as a demarcated entity, of a personhood of fixed qualities. But the proposal is not to abandon individuality altogether. Ulrich and Agathe are not trying to permanently reside in a state of oneness – indeed, it is implied that the ordinary state of awareness, and the experience of being a delimited, individual self might well be necessary for basic survival and societal functioning. The practice is, rather, one of moving between the state of bounded individuality and boundless being. The existential position outlined in the novel appears as a movement, then, a mindful oscillation between everyday reality and the Other Condition, between the I and the We, the one and the all.

Towards the end of the second volume, Agathe moves with Ulrich back to Vienna where their project encounters some challenges. As the story progresses, the reader will be aware of what the characters cannot know: that the timeline brings them ever closer to the outbreak of the First World War. But how Musil intended things to end, if the siblings' experiment was meant to survive their reintroduction to the everyday reality, outside the protective sphere of the childhood home, and war, we do not know. Musil died before finishing the novel, and in the

extensive drafts and notes he left behind – the much-discussed *Nachlass* – various possible endings are indicated. This makes for a curious case of alignment of reality with the author's philosophy. Far from undermining the philosophical project of the novel, Musil's death in 1942 and the resulting absence of an ending strengthen its very points about the non-essential and non-narrative character of human existence. We shall never know the author's intention or get an ending to the story, and this open-endedness effectively conveys the idea of the non-duality of existence, that is, the idea that everything is always becoming and in a process of ending, which collapses the distinction between being and non-being – they are the same, part of an ever-ongoing process or condition. This is a worldview that matches my own non-narrative and non-dual experience of life.

Later on, as I moved from literature and into consciousness research in my work, I encountered similar views in other places: most prominently in Buddhist philosophy and in the Western eclectic and non-religious adoption of [Buddhism as mindfulness](#). But also in the reductive and materialist accounts of personhood in Western philosophy that challenge the dominant essentialist and narrative accounts, represented by thinkers such as Hume and Mach, as well as Derek Parfit and Galen Strawson, who is similarly sceptical of the narrative approach: see his [Aeon Essay](#) 'I Am Not a Story' (2015). This strand in Western thinking is much aligned with the Buddhist view – and, in fact, potentially originally informed by it. [Alison Gopnik](#) has [pointed](#) out that Hume might have been influenced by Tibetan and Theravada ideas, made available to him through Jesuit scholars who were familiar with these traditions and who stayed at the Royal College of La Flèche at the same time as Hume was working on his *Treatise* there. It is reassuring for me that modern neuroscience finds no sign of a centre of agency or source of awareness in the brain, thus lending empirical support to my non-reductive and non-essentialist experience. Learning about all this has all helped me feel a little less weird. But Musil provided my first and strongest experience of recognition and validation.

The novel supplied me with the guiding existential principles of flexibility and mobility that I've lived by since

The Man Without Qualities has had a special impact on me, not only because it was the first time I encountered a philosophical position that matched my [divergent experience](#), but also because of its literary qualities. Musil's writing presents complex and serious scientific and philosophical ideas, but it is far from the cool and formal language of conventional scientific and analytical philosophical discourse, which can so easily alienate readers. Precision and soul, mathematics and mysticism, are synthesised and manifested stylistically in Musil's writing, creating a work that is incredibly precise, poetically rich and beautiful, and which contains some of the most captivating passages on ego-dissolution and non-dual experience I have ever encountered as a literary scholar-cum-consciousness researcher.

As such, his novel is a prime example of the special capacity of literature to facilitate experiential connection with ideas. *The Man Without Qualities* doesn't just appeal to the brain – although it does this too, and very well – but to the heart, as it were. With poetic and narrative modes and devices, it prompts imaginative engagement and emotional identification in the reader with the characters and so enables the reader to experience, through imaginative immersion in the story-world, what it means and how it feels to live well without a sense of

essential self or clear individual demarcation (in this way, literature has interesting commonalities with the epistemology of psychedelics and meditation, facilitating similar ways of 'deeper knowing' and experiential, embodied insight).

Reading Musil enabled me to poetically and rationally identify with and embrace my philosophical intuitions. The novel supplied me with the guiding existential principles of flexibility and mobility that I have lived by ever since. It helped me make sense of my first, and unintendedly strong, psychedelic trip and to psychologically integrate that experience in my life. And it has inspired and strengthened my meditation practice – when I guide meditation sessions at my philosophy centre in Oxford today, I often start with a reading from *The Man Without Qualities*.

In this novel, I met two other individuals who relate to the world as I do – without a sense of a singular and essential self or a progressive and coherent life-story – and who develop this experience into a meaningful existential position, illustrating the advantages and beauty of the no-self existence – including the potential for reduced personal suffering, greater social coherence and a sense of universal siblinghood. It alleviated my loneliness as a young student of Western egocentric narrative, taught me how to use my divergent experience as an existential advantage and has helped me live confidently as part of the no-self minority ever since.

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